



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Religious Freedom and the Fight Against Terrorism

As delivered by Catherine Kuchta-Helbling,
U.S. State Department, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights & Labor
to the Supplemental Human Dimension Meeting, Vienna
July 14, 2005

Thank you Mr. Moderator.

Before addressing the substance of this session, I would like to underscore the condolences extended by ODIHR Director Strohal this afternoon to the victims of the reprehensible terrorist acts in London and their families. We also extend our solidarity with the Government of the United Kingdom in dealing with the situation after the attacks.

Turning to the subject of religious freedom, we applaud Prime Minister Tony Blair for his efforts immediately after the explosions in London to ensure that Muslims living in the UK were not blamed for the attacks.

The tragedies of September 11, March 11, Beslan, and London have been a graphic reminder of the threat of terrorism. We need to be mindful of the role religion sometimes plays in this conflict, as many terrorists have chosen to hide behind a distorted version of their faiths. The United States welcomes this topic and hopes the discussion will highlight effective ways to uphold the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, while protecting our societies from terrorism.

Mr. Moderator, responsible leadership can prevent religious and immigrant communities from becoming stigmatized or targeted for discrimination, violence or repression because of their faith. That is why the United States firmly rejects the identification of any religion with terrorism. In President Bush's address to Congress just days after the towers of the World Trade Center fell, he underscored that the teachings of Islam "are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah." He also said that, "the terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying, in effect, to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists."

Of course, words alone are not enough – law enforcement officials must also vigorously investigate and prosecute acts of hate against religious communities.

Governments can be part of the problem, or part of the solution. While we cannot and must not dismiss genuine security concerns against the backdrop of terrorist attacks, there is a very real

danger of allowing fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, to be curtailed in the name of security.

Governments in Central Asia and Russia's North Caucasus must grapple with violent extremists. Unfortunately, authorities in these regions have frequently found it difficult to establish a proper balance between security and respect for human rights. In some cases excessively harsh and unmeasured tactics are used, even though these can exacerbate tensions and repress religious freedom. Uzbekistan has long repressed its Muslims citizens under the pretext of fighting terrorism, jailing thousands for their religious affiliations or beliefs. Such actions have only led to greater instability at the cost of lives and freedoms.

Policing and counterterrorism activities are legitimate. Yet, the United States steadfastly believes that respecting religious freedom is a vital antidote to terrorism. Government control of religious organizations rarely, if ever, works to limit the spread of extremist ideology under the guise of religion. Perhaps effective in the short-term, repressive policies against religious communities in the long-term can foster dissent and force groups underground, removing them from public scrutiny and religious debates.

In closing, there are bright lines to be drawn, even in the murky world of combating terrorism. Religious freedom can actually help defeat this scourge.

In this regard, I would like to make the following recommendations:

First, participating States must remember that religious freedom is a right, and that national security should not be used as an improper justification for limiting this right;

Second, participating States should allow individuals to worship, individually or in community with others, and to convey their beliefs through education;

Third, religious communities should be allowed to operate freely, without government oversight or intervention, and any registration requirements should be fair and not burdensome ;

Fourth, groups perpetrating criminal activities under the guise of religious activity should be prosecuted;

Fifth, participating States should reach out to minority religious communities and work with them to combat terrorism.

Finally, governments should avoid actions that contribute to the stereotyping of religious communities, especially via state media outlets.

Thank you very much.